

Loma Prieta quake remembered 16 years later

Earthquake - Ten years
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Second Harvest's Elliott-McCrea recalls experience, reinforces current need

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Two million pounds of food, one hundred pallets of water and the help of people from around the country helped Second Harvest Food Bank in

Watsonville respond to the Loma Prieta earthquake 16 years ago.

"The quake brought a tidal wave of generosity," said Second Harvest Executive Director Willy Elliott-McCrea, who led a tour of the food bank Mon-

day, the anniversary of the 7.1-magnitude earthquake centered eight miles north of Aptos.

Santa Cruz County suffered extensive

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damage. With power knocked out, bridges damaged, highways closed and thousands of people forced to live in tents, local government and assistance agencies were sorely taxed.

In light of recent hurricanes on the Gulf Coast and a quake that resulted in major loss of life in India and Pakistan, the idea of community preparedness and the ability to react to disaster has become increasingly relevant.

Ironically, Elliott-McCrea remembered, he was attending a disaster preparedness meeting when the Loma Prieta quake struck at 5:04 p.m. on Oct. 17, 1989.

When the ground stopped shaking and the initial shock wore off, everyone who had been sitting around the table (and were now under it) realized that was exactly what they were preparing for and their readiness for such an event would now be tested.

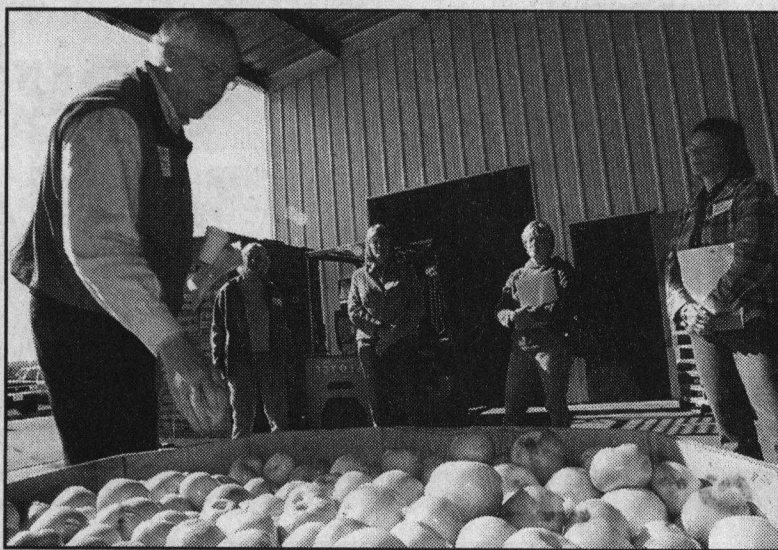
Becoming one of the nerve centers of the community's emergency response, Second Harvest received 2 million pounds of food in the two weeks following the earthquake. With a National Guard unit bivouacked at the facility to help distribute supplies, 25,000 people were provided food each week. Helicopters flew in 100 pallets of water and food was sent to people camping in tent cities set up in Ramsay and Callaghan parks.

In the months following, Second Harvest continued to distribute food to thousands living in FEMA trailers and struggling to cope with the economic impact of the quake.

Mark Woodward, a Santa Cruz County resident who attended the tour Monday, said he was not aware 16 years ago of all the food bank had done to help people affected by the quake.

"I remember after the earthquake reading about what was going on with the food collection and so forth, but I didn't know much about it then," Woodward said. "Learning about the history of it now is amazing. They really did — and continue to do — a lot."

One thing the earthquake underlined was the importance of having



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Willy Elliott-McCrea (left), executive director of Second Harvest Food Bank, leads a special tour Monday to help illustrate the crucial role the food bank played in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

a central location like Second Harvest to collect and distribute food, clothing and other supplies.

Fifty trucks a day hauled supplies into Watsonville and unloaded at the warehouse. With the food bank acting as the clearinghouse, its network of member agencies handled distribution on the neighborhood level.

The earthquake reinforced the notion that the logistics of maintaining a centralized food bank with a corresponding distribution network is essential. It also underscored the necessity of meeting the community's long-term needs. When some of the national disaster relief agencies left town, there were still people in need of food, which Second Harvest was called upon to supply.

"We are a permanent part of the community," said Elliott-McCrea. "We are here not only for the relief effort, but also the recovery and rebuilding phases that follow and can take years to complete."

Part of the job of an organization such as Second Harvest is to manage the food supply and make sure it continues to be available to those who need it.

"The food and funds we received from communities throughout California enabled us to create the programs and ongoing support the community needed," Elliott-McCrea said.

A need for programs such as Ag

Against Hunger and the annual Holiday Food Drive became apparent in 1989. It also became apparent that a change in focus was necessary. Rather than being involved in direct distribution, Second Harvest's mission changed to involve the community in feeding the hungry. As a central warehouse, Second Harvest would handle the storage and get food to neighborhood groups that would get it to those in need.

"This enabled us to become more community-based as we put the food in the hands of institutions and groups that people were comfortable with," Elliott-McCrea said. "We also now operate a community food hotline, where people can find out where they can get help from about 30 grassroots organizations."

Another outcome of coping with the quake was the realization that it was important to maintain a large, rotating supply of water and food for future disasters.

With World Food Day falling on the anniversary of the quake and the recent disasters fresh in everyone's minds, Elliott-McCrea said people should find it easy to empathize with individuals who need assistance.

"There are so many things that can knock a person or family off their feet and create the need for some type of assistance," he said. "Helping neighbors to feed neighbors is what we are all about."